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The importance of preserving and maintaining records of African American cemeteries

Cemeteries are established to benefit the living, define, and give character to a place, and perpetuate the memories of the deceased. Cemeteries are among the historic resources which are most valuable in reminding various settlement patterns and in revealing information on religion, historical events, geology, and lifestyles. Therefore, the African American cemeteries are the sacred ties providing essential links to the history, family connection, and cultural ties of the African-Americans. The preservation and maintenance of the cemetery records are essential in helping to provide legal protection of the cemeteries concerning the African American communities, residents, and family members. The records for African American cemeteries will help reveal the ethnic diversity due to the high mortality rate and the low life expectancy of the African American community compared to the whites, which will help develop strategies to address the issues. Also, the African American communities are distributed all across America; therefore, the African American cemeteries records offer a vital, tangible connection to history, which helps the community reconstruct their spanning family legacy and study their family history. The cemetery information also reveals historical events that affected the African American community, creating a deep historical connection to the local community by bringing the residents together through their heritage. Therefore, cemetery records on the African American community help provide a deeper understanding of the community's lifestyle, sociocultural differences, and

past experiences, which helps bridge the gap between them and other ethnic communities in America.

Unfortunately, the expansion and development of urban areas, vandalism and theft, natural forces, and lack of fences threaten historic cemeteries from remaining permanent reminders of the communities' heritage. Neglect of the cemeteries compounds accelerates the threat on the cemeteries, thus calling for actions towards preserving the cemeteries. With inequality in America on race, it is also safe to assume that there are significant differences in cemetery conditions in the African American community compared to the Whites. However, preserving the cemeteries starts with us and requires community-driven efforts. The African American community can record the abandoned and unidentified cemeteries in their area to add them to the government records to allow for future landowner property knowledge of the cemetery. The community can also apply for historic cemetery designation, including the history, photographs, historic deed records, and a map of their cemeteries to protect them from some of the threats limiting them from remaining a permanent remainder of the African American community heritage. Also, forming a cemetery association or corporation will help the African American community create regulations and rules that protect their cemeteries and help raise tax-deductible funds to enable the maintenance, preservation, conservation, and clean-up efforts on their cemeteries. These steps help the African American community protect their cemeteries from various threats; therefore, educating the citizens on the importance of cemetery preservation is equally important. Citizen education involves teaching the community through workshops, community outreach, social media, and local non-profit PR campaigns. Educating the citizens will increase awareness of the importance of cemetery participation in the community and increase community participation in the preservation efforts.